

Quarterly NEWS-LETTER

OF THE BOOK CLUB OF
CALIFORNIA

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THE HELMET OF MEMBRINO

by ALBERT M. BENDER, Chairman, Publication Committee

OLD-TIME San Franciscans will perhaps recall Horace F. Cutter, otherwise known as Don Horacio and the Bachelor of San Francisco, who made the city his home from the early '50s until his death just after the turn of the century. San Francisco during that period had more than its share of picturesque characters, but few among that group had better or more various claims to remembrance than Don Horacio. With apparently no other equipment than a ready pen, an abnormally active imagination, and a range of interests limited by neither time nor space, he made his influence felt in so many

directions that his sympathetic biographer, James D. Hague, was justified in calling him "a composite, in characteristic qualities, of Confucious, Socrates, Swedenborg, Don Quixote, Mr. Micawber and Colonel Sellers."

Among Cutter's myriad interests was a lifelong admiration for Cervantes, an enthusiasm shared by his old-time friend, Clarence King, and fostered by long discussions of Don Quixote between the pair on their tramps about San Francisco in the '70s. When King some years later went to Europe and presently found himself in La Mancha, it was natural that he should think of his San Francisco friend and that he should wish to send him a suitable souvenir from this very province where Don Quixote had begun his exploits.

King's selection was an excellent one—a barber's basin of antique design, just such a basin as had attracted the eye of the good Don when he saw it on the head of an approaching traveller and caused him to mistake it for the golden helmet of Membrino. A suitable "helmet" was located and duly dispatched to Cutter in San Francisco, together with a message from King recounting the circumstances of its finding and purchase. This message—one of Clarence King's most amusing and delightful essays—was published in the May 1886 number of the *Century Magazine*, and received the enthusiastic welcome it deserved. Some eighteen years later, after its author's death, it was reprinted in a memorial volume to King, published in a small (and now rare) edition by The Century Association in 1904. In the same book appeared a comprehensive biographical sketch of Cutter, written by James D. Hague, and containing an account of the curious later history of

the helmet, of its disappearance after Cutter's death and of the unexpected result of the efforts made to recover it.

Because it has a strong California interest and a particular appeal to booklovers, but mostly because it makes highly entertaining reading, the Club plans to make *The Helmet of Membrino* its next publication. The book will contain Clarence King's essay, Hague's memoir of Cutter, and a foreword written for the Club's edition by Francis P. Farquhar, authority on King and his writings.

Members will presently receive an announcement of the publication, giving details as to printer, size of the edition and the price, together with an invitation to subscribe for their copies. The Club hopes for a particularly hearty response. The number of copies printed will depend on how many advance orders are received. In view of the attractions of the book, the Club is optimistic enough to hope that a minimum of 300 copies will be required.

THE CALIFORNIA LITERARY PAMPHLETS

THE Club's 1936 series of keepsakes was inaugurated in February with the distribution to the members of Part One of *The California Literary Pamphlets*. This consisted of a 20-page brochure designed and printed by The Grabhorn Press and containing a short story, *Over an Absinthe Bottle*, by W. C. Morrow. As most of the members know, Morrow was a San Francisco writer of the '90s and later, whose contributions to the leading literary journals of the period won him a wide following among discriminating readers. Although his

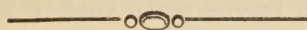
output was small, all his work was characterized by meticulous workmanship and unusual imaginative force. During his later years he gave instruction in the technique of authorship, successfully pioneering in what was then an almost untried field. It is interesting to know that Charles Caldwell Dobie, who wrote the foreword to the Club's pamphlet, was one of Morrow's students.

Pamphlet Number Two, which will be sent members early in April, will contain a selection of the poetry of Nora May French, the foreword to which will be written by Sara Bard Field. In the opinion of many competent critics, Miss French's tragic death at Carmel in 1907, at the age of twenty-six, terminated a career that might in a few years have made her a major American poet. The small amount of work she left behind is of such quality as to justify George Sterling's statement that "every time she put her pen to paper something perfect was the result." The Club pamphlet will include a selection of the best of her limited output. It will be appropriately printed by Wilder Bentley at his Archetype Press, Berkeley.

The other four pamphlets of the series are in preparation and announcement of their subjects will be made in due course. The Club's purpose in this series is to present for contemporary readers and collectors a group of California writers of an earlier day whose work has fallen into undeserved obscurity. As was the case with the two earlier series, each part is being produced by a different Western printer. Hence, although the pamphlets will be of uniform size, they will present an interesting variety of design, decoration and typographical treatment.

For the proper safekeeping of their sets, the Club is again undertaking to supply members with specially designed slipcases. The cases are similar to those made for the two earlier series and, like them, are made in two styles: with all-cloth covering at \$2.00, and cloth with morocco back at \$3.00. The covering is a dark blue bookcloth; the cases are substantial and attractive, and the title of the series and the Club's imprint are stamped in gold on blue leather labels.

The Club makes no profit from the sale of slipcases, which are supplied solely as a convenience to members. Those who intend ordering are urged to do so promptly so that the Club may estimate how many will be needed.



PUBLISHING AND THE "GOLDEN AGE"

Editor's Note: The author of the following article lives in California and has published a number of books, both fiction and non-fiction, with a California background. The subject he discusses—the lack of adequate local publishing facilities for Pacific Coast authors and its effect on the native literature—will be of interest to every booklover and collector in the West.

NOT long ago I received a letter from the man in New York who has published my last two books. "I wish," he wrote, "that you would keep an eye on what appears in the magazines published out your way and let me know if they are printing anything of promise by new writers. Also, if there are any small publishing firms in the West that issue work by new authors I will appreciate your telling me how to get in touch with them."

Letters of this type are not at all unusual. I suppose most writers who live in California have had similar requests from their publishers. Within a space of a few

weeks this past winter I received three invitations to functions gotten up for the purpose of enabling Eastern publishers to make personal contacts with California authors, known and unknown. These men had crossed the continent for the sole purpose of locating promising authors and of persuading them to send their book manuscripts to their particular firms.

All this is very flattering to the writers of the coast. Without doubt it shows that in the opinion of these shrewd judges many commercially successful books are being written, and will be written, on the Pacific Coast. Certainly it proves that any Western writer who can produce a book that promises to sell well will have no trouble coming to terms with one or another of the big Eastern publishing houses.

On the surface, it would seem that conditions were never so favorable for the development of the literature of the Pacific Coast. There are many, however, who believe that exactly the reverse is true. I make this statement because I have recently discussed the subject with a number of authors, all of whom have independently reached the same conclusion.

Let me attempt to explain why we think this is so. Most established writers have occasion to read the work of beginners who come to them for advice on how to "become an author." One cannot encounter many of these ambitious tyros without realizing that the percentage of talent is high, and that many need only the discipline and tempering process of a thorough apprenticeship to realize their goal.

Now we come to the source of the difficulty: here in the West we have almost no facilities for providing this vitally necessary training. It is futile to say to the prom-

ising beginner, "Go out and get your training," because when he asks the natural questions, Where? and How? we have almost nothing to suggest. We cannot send them to the Eastern publishers, eager as they are for salable books from the West. Naturally, they want performance, not promise. We tell them to try the magazines, which are also published in the East and intended for national circulation, and they encounter the same situation. The magazines too require finished—that is, trained—writers.

Of course, a few new writers manage to break through, but those who do are far fewer than most people imagine, and they need not concern us here. They are not enough to affect the situation—which is this: the development of our Western literature is being retarded in its natural growth because promising beginners have almost no local facilities for learning their trade. This in turn is true because national magazines and national book publishers have supplanted the local enterprises that in the past were their natural training schools. For let it be understood that a local literature can flourish only when it is possible for scores of new writers to have the facilities for steady and frequent publication.

In proof of this, one has only to compare conditions today with those of the '60s, the period generally regarded as the "Golden Age" of California literature. It is not a coincidence that the writer then had a dozen local outlets for his work for every one available to his successor today. One cannot avoid the conclusion that the '60s was a productive and stimulating period in our literature, not because there was then more talent here but simply because there were more facilities for its development.

Writers on the literary history of the West emphasize that the success of such early journals as the *Golden Era*, the *Californian*, the *Overland*, the *Pacific Monthly* and others was due to their brilliant group of contributors: to Harte and Twain, Stoddard, Muir, King, Mulford, and the rest. This is undoubtedly true. But it is equally true that this group of journals was in turn responsible for the success of the contributors.

Had there been no local literary papers to print their early work and thereby support and encourage them during their apprenticeship, how many writers would the California of that period have produced? How many of the names I have mentioned above would be known today? It is also pertinent to ask how many writers of equal talent who lived in later periods—including the present—have failed to reach their potentialities because local facilities for their training are almost entirely lacking?

It is easy to draw conclusions from all this. If we are to have another revival of Western literature what is needed is not more talent—that is present in abundance—but more outlets for that talent while it is passing through the vitally important formative period. Here in the West there is a missing section in the literary aspirant's road toward success: that period when he is developing his powers and perfecting his technique to the point where he will become subject to the blandishments of the national magazines and the Eastern book publishers.

Until this gap is bridged, we shall continue to see new writers emerge from time to time. But it is futile to hope for a major flowering of talent, for anything resembling another "Golden Age."

ELECTED TO MEMBERSHIP

THE following names have been added to the roll since December 1:

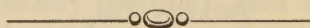
<i>Member</i>		<i>Sponsor</i>
E. Roberts Bailey, Jr.	Piedmont, Cal.	Miss Rosalind A. Keep
Charles H. Beckwith	San Francisco, Cal.	C. A. Gerken
F. M. Breslin	San Francisco, Cal.	George R. Keast
Harold A. Brown	Beverly Hills, Cal.	Mrs. Frank H. Bennett
William Deans	San Francisco, Cal.	Oscar Lewis
Mrs. James W. Edwards	San Francisco, Cal.	Alfred Sutro
Edward B. Ellsworth	San Francisco, Cal.	Oscar Lewis
Edward W. Engs, Jr.	Piedmont, Cal.	R. O. Simon
Mrs. H. P. Faye	Berkeley, Cal.	J. J. Newbegin
Mrs. John C. Gooding	Santa Paula, Cal.	Oscar Lewis
W. F. Hanrahan	San Francisco, Cal.	A. R. Franklin
Ralph S. Harris	New York, N. Y.	Alfred Sutro
Mrs. Robert B. Henderson	Burlingame, Cal.	Mrs. L. I. Scott
Emerson L. Holt	Riverside, Cal.	Oscar Lewis
E. N. Kierulff	San Francisco, Cal.	Oscar Lewis
Frederic R. Kirkland	Philadelphia, Pa.	Alfred Sutro
Arthur S. Kleeman	New York, N. Y.	Albert M. Bender
Otto E. Koegel	New York, N. Y.	Alfred Sutro
R. W. Miller	San Francisco, Cal.	Alfred Sutro
H. D. Pillsbury	San Francisco, Cal.	Alfred Sutro
Stephen R. Roberts	Beverly Hills, Cal.	Oscar Lewis
Cortlandt Schoonover	Middletown, Del.	Oscar Lewis
Omar C. Spencer	Portland, Ore.	Alfred Sutro
Harley Stevens	San Francisco, Cal.	Alfred Sutro
Melville C. Threlkeld, Jr.	Los Angeles, Cal.	Roger Bixby Smith
Frank W. Wentworth	Mills College, Cal.	Albert M. Bender
Dr. Harold Zimmerman	Sacramento, Cal.	Miss Caroline Wenzel

The Club's membership now stands at 440 (including honorary and life members), the highest point since 1930. Sixty additional names are needed to reach the maximum of 500, and toward the attainment of this goal the continued cooperation of members is warmly invited.

This request is not made solely for the satisfaction of having a full membership roll, pleasant as that will be. In addition, a highly practical problem is involved: that of striking a balance between Club income and Club

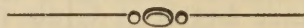
expenses. With a full roll, a state of financial equilibrium will be comparatively easy to maintain—a distinct improvement over the present condition, when the scale inclines all too frequently on the debit side.

The satisfactory gains in membership during the past year or more have been almost entirely due to the interest of individual members. Appreciatively, the Club offers thanks for this good work and cordially invites its continuance.



MEMORIAL

JOHN J. JOHNCK. The passing of John J. Johnck on January 12, 1936 removed one of San Francisco's notable printers and a friend and member of the Club of long standing. Mr. Johnck was not only an expert and conscientious craftsman but a man of wide reading and sound judgment, with an abiding interest in the literary traditions of the West. The last of the four books he printed for the Club was of his own selection: William Marion Reedy's essay on San Francisco, which he fashioned into an appropriate and charming little volume. On the library shelves of hundreds of collectors throughout the West stand examples of his work; books that are sound in design and workmanship and that greet the eye with much the same strength and pleasant simplicity that characterized their creator. A man of talent and integrity, and of lovable personal qualities, his memory is revered by all who were permitted to enjoy his friendship.



NOTES ON PUBLICATIONS

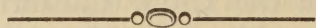
THE annual Fifty Books of the Year exhibition sponsored by The American Institute of Graphic Arts opened at the New York Public Library in February. The Pacific Coast is represented this year by five books, one of which, Prentice Mulford's *California Sketches*, was published by the Club. *California Sketches* was designed and printed by John Henry Nash; in addition to the distinction conferred on it by inclusion in the Graphic Arts exhibition, the book is a desirable item of Californiana, for it contains the only available printing of many of Mulford's finest California essays. A limited number of the 300 copies printed are still on hand, at \$5.50 each.

The Club's latest publication, *A Printer's Garland: A Typographical Miscellany*, printed by The Windsor Press and issued in December, had a sale well above the average of recent Club books. This is a gratifying indication that with improved conditions a larger number of members are subscribing for the new publications as they appear. That there are still many who do not avail themselves of this privilege is shown, however, by the fact that of the edition of only 250 copies some are still on hand and available to late-comers. The price of this attractive little publication is \$2.75.

In this connection, it might be pointed out that the supply of a number of the most desirable earlier publications is approaching the vanishing point. Members who have been planning to add some of these to their collections will be interested (and perhaps disturbed) to learn that of the twenty-four titles still in print, the supply of twelve numbers less than forty copies each,

and that of five of the latter ten copies or less remain. A list of the available books will be sent on request.

Besides *The Helmet of Membrino*, described elsewhere in this issue, several books are being considered for possible publication during 1936. Plans for these, however, have not yet reached a stage where they can be definitely announced.



MISCELLANY

¶ This number completes the third year of the *News-Letter*. It is gratifying to know that members feel that it has adequately served the purposes for which it was started. That a considerable number have thought well enough of the paper to wish to preserve a complete file has been a pleasant surprise. Requests for back numbers are regularly being received from members, and these are supplied whenever possible. Unfortunately, no copies of the first four numbers (of which only 350 each were printed) remain on hand.

¶ Some interesting contributions to *The Question Box*, the department of bibliographical comment inaugurated in the December *News-Letter*, have been received. Due to pressure of space, however, it has been necessary to omit this feature from the present issue. *The Question Box* will probably reappear in June.

¶ "The Book Club of California is an active organization, and its publications have the great virtue of being simple, sensible, and of moderate price." Thus Carl Purington Rollins concludes a review of the *Western Authors* series in his department on fine printing in the *Saturday Review of Literature*. When forwarding her application for membership, a Southern California collector wrote: "I have been wanting to join for years." An attorney in Portland, Oregon, whose check in payment of dues temporarily miscarried, wrote stating his willingness to pay twice because he considered his membership worth it. The Club is inherently modest and abhors tooting its own trumpet. But these are unsolicited (and authentic) testimonials, received within the past week or two. As the advertisements state, names will be supplied on request.